

# The Life and Death of Henry Foster

Harry White

HENRY FOSTER shot himself just before Christmas. His fat wife, Melissa, squeezed out tears. She had so wanted the holiday season to be a happy one. She sobbed as they carried his white-sheeted form out the door and through the crowd of neighbors who fluttered about the yard in the cold winter wind.

Melissa glanced around the room—through her tears, of course—as consoling friends hesitated at the doorway. That rug will have to be cleaned, she thought. But the insurance money . . . a new rug! Poor Henry! . . . and drapes to match. More tears rolled down her puffy cheeks, leaving pale streaks in her rouge.

But Henry had committed suicide and no insurance money was forthcoming. This fact, alone, supplied tears until the last spadeful of dirt had covered the grave. The tears stopped then, for that, as far as Melissa was concerned, was the end of Henry.

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But it was far from the end of Henry—for Henry. He had perched himself on the edge of the chair that morning three days before and pulled the trigger with a skinny toe, thinking that he was ending it all. The end of Melissa, who had grown fat these past several years and was in the process of becoming a shrew, a goal which she worked toward seriously. The end of chattering bridge parties and cold greasy hash for supper. The end of his flat brown desk at the bank with its tattered green blotter and sterile array of pens and pencils. The end not of a life but an existence.

He put the barrel of the shotgun in his mouth like a giant lollipop. But this is sin, he thought, and his toe faltered on the trigger. New resolution came. "I don't care!" he tried to shout around the muzzle—and he gave his toe a jerk.

There was a burst of red flame as the room exploded, and Henry felt himself expand like a bubble, out and out, stretching thinner and thinner. There was a crash, and he burst and shiveled to nothing, falling down into a void that had no bottom, blown like a dry leaf in a searing wind.

Then, silence.

He felt a cold surface under his bare feet, and he blinked, trying to adjust his vision to see where he was. He looked around, bewildered, as a glare of light sent sharp pain through his eyes.

He found himself dressed just as he had been when he had—left. A white cotton nightshirt hung on his bony frame. His legs, covered with paper-like skin, stuck out beneath, and his blue-veined hands fiddled with the hems of his sleeves as he peered about with watery gray eyes.

He stood in the center of an immense paved square which stretched out in the distance until its limits, on two opposite sides, were obscured by a thick rolling mist. On the two remaining sides the plaza was bounded by two great stone buildings towering darkly up and up until they too were lost in the white fog. Except for Henry and his nightshirt, the plaza was bare.

He looked at the building on the left. There was a wide flight of marble steps leading to a single doorway set in the gray stone front. Over the door was carved in tall block letters the single word, "HEAVEN."

He turned to his right. The structure there was similar, but the steps were quite well worn and the lettering announced that this was the entrance to "HELL."

Henry stood there, still plucking at his sleeves. Wasn't someone supposed to lead him? Wouldn't he have a guide? Where was he supposed to go? Indecision twitched Henry's balding head back and forth.

He turned to the right and stood looking at "HEAVEN" for a moment, but the fog was beginning to lower, obscuring the entrance. He shook his head in resignation. He could not go there. He turned around, squared his narrow shoulders, and began a forlorn, bare-footed march across the square. His nightshirt swayed in a cold breeze which touched the back of his neck with an icy tendril of mist.

The air was getting colder, and the fog was advancing in billows across the plaza, rolling and bulging as it came. The damp white walls began to tower over him, threatening to engulf him. He began to quicken his pace.

Clammy perspiration broke out around his eyes, and he began walking faster and faster as the mists closed in on each side until he reached the steps. Fear propelled him up them in a scrambling run and he flung himself against a dark wooden door which blocked his way. The vapor rolled after him, clutching his bare legs with a damp and chilling grasp.

He tried the latch on the door. It was locked. The fog was boiling about him now, smothering his breath and drawing his strength out as it closed in. He began to pound frantically on the door.

"Let me in! Oh, God, let me in!" he screamed, between convulsive gasps.

The door opened suddenly and he all but fell inside. It closed just as quickly behind him as he stumbled forward.

A smooth voice spoke. "It seems to me, my friend, that your appeal is somewhat misdirected."

Henry, startled, looked across the soft green carpet on which he found himself. Near the opposite wall of an office-like room sat a huge mahogany desk with papers stacked neatly around its edges.



Behind it stood a dark, slender man dressed in a charcoal business suit, his sensitive tapering fingers resting lightly on the desk top. Oily black hair, combed straight back, formed a sharp V on his forehead. His eyes, deep jet, snapped with a vital energy which gripped Henry in paralyzed fascination.

"Welcome," he said in a liquid voice, "to Hell." He smiled widely, showing white teeth.

"Who—who are you?" Henry asked in a tremulous whisper, and tried to step backward—but failed.

"Oh, come now. You have, I'm sure, seen me at one time or another."

"I—," faltered Henry.

The man came around the desk. "Call me what you wish. The important thing is that I *am*." He stood before the trembling Henry. "The important thing, for you," he continued, "is that *you* are *here*."

He put a friendly hand on Henry's shoulder and smiled in secret amusement. He spoke again. "Now, I would like to ask you, Mr. Foster, just why you chose this place," and he gestured with his hand, "instead of the—ah—establishment across the way." He stepped back and pierced Henry with his eyes.

"Why, I—I had to," Henry replied in a stronger voice. He was beginning to find his wits in these more normal surroundings.

"Had to, Mr. Foster?" the man said, arching his black eyebrows in mock surprise. "I might remind you that you had a free choice out there on the square."

"Free—but the fog—I," Henry quavered.

"The fog?" The man chuckled. "Only an illusion to deceive the weak, Mr. Foster. You made it, I am afraid, much worse than it really was. You were fleeing from a mere shadow."

Henry's mouth trembled. "An illusion—made by you?" he asked.

"That," said the man, "depends upon the viewpoint."

"You tricked me!"

"That, I would say, also depends upon the viewpoint. More properly—you tricked yourself."

Henry closed his eyes and his small frame shrank under his nightshirt as he realized that salvation had been so near.

The man returned to the rear of the desk, where he sat down and picked up one of the stacks of papers. "Have a seat, Mr. Foster, while we discuss your disposition," he said, indicating a chair.

Henry stepped forward and sank onto the chair as tears welled into his eyes. The nightshirt, heavy with perspiration, hung in damp gray folds from his body.

"Now then, Mr. Foster, let's get down to business." He shuffled through the papers and read from a page. "Born, May 18, 1900. Mother, domineering, nasty temper. Father, weak and retiring, an alcoholic. Early life spent in poverty."

He picked up another page and continued. "Wife, Melissa Foster, nee Burke. Lazy, greedy, also domineering—my friend, Sigmund, might defend you, but responsibility's the key, Foster."

"You were employed, I see, at the Chesterville Bank for a period of thirty years where you computed accounts, an occupation which you pursued for the entire term of your employment there."

He dropped the page on the desk and looked up at Henry. His words were quiet and slick. "Your life has been one filled with misery, Foster, but—I might add—one devoid of any damning actions or thoughts—until, of course, your terminal act."

Henry's eyes came wide, and he protested as a man who sees a light through his desperation. "But you can't judge me! It's not your place. The—"

The man waved the protest aside. "I would like to remind you that you judged yourself but a short time ago out there on the plaza. Besides, when you were—or are—judged matters but little. Time, as you shall see, means nothing here."

He leaned forward on his desk, pinning Henry to the chair with an intense gaze. "Suicide is a very serious offense. You realize that, of course, or you would not have chosen this place. And, as a serious offense, it demands quite a unique punishment."

Henry squirmed, trying to escape the glare of the deep black eyes.

"You're going to relive your life, Foster—just as it was!" the man's voice crackled across the room.

"NO! You can't. It was horrible. That's why—"

"Exactly," the man interrupted. "And that," he said sardonically as Henry faded from sight, "is the Hell of it."

## Crazy Horse

Ronald M. Corn

IT WAS eight o'clock when Fred Rienke slammed the screen door and side-stepped the bright colored blocks and tiny plastic and metal toys that lay scattered and broken upon the porch floor. He hurried down the steps and across the walk and kicked open the front gate. Worriedly, he looked northward to see if he could catch a glimpse of the eight-o-five express bus before it reached Ninth Street.

From inside the house, Ethel Rienke watched her husband's hurrying form move out of sight behind the listless leaves of an overhanging elm tree; then silently she opened the screen door and quickly glanced up and down the street. Pausing for a moment, she listened thoughtfully. But she heard only the noises of distantly moving traffic. Finally, she pulled herself soundlessly back into the house. As she turned away from the door, a childish, babbling sound came from a hall-way leading off from the small darkened dining room.